California Contract Education TAP Boot Camp

Slide 1: Unit 5 – Needs Assessments

Unit Five: Needs Assessments.

Slide 2: What is a needs assessment?

A needs assessment is a process designed to identify either the challenges or the opportunities that a company has. And to assess whether training or some other intervention, like mentoring, or new materials, new technology, that sort of thing will help employees achieve the desired performance success.

Slide 3: Needs assessments explore

Needs assessments take a look at at least three things. One is performance problems. This generally has to do with the company recognizing that it has a performance that they want. And then they have a performance that they actually have. And they're hoping to assess the gap and come to understand the gap and how to close it. The second thing that needs assessments look at is the implementation of a new technology or a work practice or a system. This would be the kind of thing that we did if we wanted to implement a focus on quality in a company. And the third thing that needs assessments can explore is sometimes a company doesn't have a performance problem, but they're in a period of growth or improvement, and they have a new opportunity coming up. And they want to decide how to best maximize the chance of making the most of that opportunity. And so they take a look at that situation with a needs assessment.

Slide 4: Why might a client need training?

So why might a client need training? There are five things that primarily drive the need for training. The first one is a need for new knowledge. So maybe they know the right things, but they don't need... they don't know enough of that. Or maybe they know enough of it, but they don't know it deeply enough. Or maybe they know part of the subject, but not part of the related subject, that kind of thing.

The second thing is a need for new or specialized skills. This can have to do with changing technology. So let's say for example, we're looking at a group of radar technicians. They may have 20 years experience in the business, but maybe some

new technology comes out. They don't know how to use it, therefore they need training.

The third thing that drives a need for training is business problems. So again, this is the gap. You have a performance that you want. You have the performance that you have; maybe your error rate, for example is too high. And then the needs assessment is to just to try to understand that gap, and to therefore be able to in a knowledgeable and effective way, decide how to close the gap.

The fourth thing is every once in a while. And when I think of this, what comes to mind is safety training. There's legislation that changes, that says that people must know how to do XYZ in the workplace. And so one of the great ways to find new jobs and training is to watch the news and the industries they serve and watch for changes in legislation.

And then the last thing is they may need to develop a new culture or mindset. So these days, for example, if we were doing training to prevent sexual harassment, or maybe we were doing training to help us leverage diversity in the workplace, I would consider those culture and mindset trainings.

Slide 5: Why do an assessment?

So why do we do a needs assessment from our own side as trainers and educators? Why do we do them? What we're trying to really do is understand who we're training and what their needs are. A couple of things drive this. One is we don't want to under train people. If we do that, they get most of what they need to know to perform well, but not all. That's a shame, isn't it?

Also, the same issue arises with overtraining. If we're training a group of people to use a word processing program and never in their work will they do indexing, then it's a waste of their time if we train that.

We're also trying to see if training is the right solution. Sometimes it's mentoring or a piece of new technology, or consulting of some kind.

And then the fourth thing that we want to do is we want to help the company get their priorities straight. Because sometimes if we need to train five or six things, before we get those things trained, the political support or the money run out. And so it's important to have trained the most important, the most impactful things first.

We also do needs assessments to document baselines for existing competencies. So this is particularly important when we're training a work group or when we're training individuals.

And we want to be able to track their path, their progression, through gaining more competencies.

From our side, we do the needs assessment as its very helpful to make sure that we know what we need to know, to form a proposal to deliver training. So because of our needs assessment, we should be able to describe the problem accurately, and be able to create or co-create a really good solution. And then finally, every once in a while, the needs assessment is part of a return on investment process.

Slide 6: 8 step needs assessment process

So LERN recommends an eight step needs assessment process. Here are the eight steps. Let's go through them one by one.

Slide 7: 1. Understand the challenge

Step number one is to understand the challenge. Of course, if we're going to create a solution, we should understand the problem that the solution is mapped to remedy. Here on this list, I've listed some of the most common causes of business problems. And you can use these. And what I like to do is have these on a three-by-five card, laminate that card, and carry it with me to every sales meeting so that I can kind of, in my mind, go down through the list and see, "Is this what's causing the clients performance problem?"

Slide 8: 2. Collect info about the challenge

The second thing is, then, once we think we understand the problem a little bit, or we just kind of know the ballpark of the problem, then we need to start collecting information about it. Generally, then, I take three areas of focus. One is: What's the scope of the problem? Is it a big problem or a small problem? What are the problem's causes? What are its causes and what are its root causes? And then, what's the problem's impact on the company? What does it cost them in terms of time, energy, money, relationship with their customers, and so on?

Slide 9: Data gathering methods

Now, there are lots of ways to gather that data for the things that we talked about on that slide. I have a list of them here. And of course, there are even more.

Slide 10: Factors in selecting methods

And the question is, which ones of those should we use? And the answer is, it depends on how complicated the needs assessment is going to be. It depends on how big the training contract is. And it depends on what kind of a relationship you have with the client. If your trust level is not high, or if this is a new client, you may not, for example, get access to human resource records or litigations against the company. They might not want to give those to you if they don't have confidence in the relationship. So from that list, you choose whatever actually you have access to.

Slide 11: 3. Organize what you learned

Once you use whatever data gathering methods you have, now you're going to have a big pile of information. And what you need to do is organize it. What I like to do is organize it into what I call categories of concern or categories of opportunity. So for example, I might be preparing to say to the client, we have people issues, we have documentation issues, and we have error issues. So that's three areas of concern or categories of concern. Now, I would like to decide before I write the proposal, or write up the needs assessment report: Which of those things can be solved with training? And which one of them can't? And for those that can be solved with training, what would the training be? Would it be classes? Or would they be online? Would they be face-to-face? And so on.

Slide 12: 4. Prioritize the client's needs

Now, I'd like to prioritize the client's needs. So what I usually do at this point for a large contract is I go back to the client and I say, "I'm starting to learn these things about the challenges and the opportunities that we see right now. And I've identified four areas. So take a look at those. And you tell me in terms of urgency, in terms of impact on the company's day-to-day operations, what's the priority order of the things that we're discovering?"

Slide 13: 5. Develop a problem statement

Now I develop a problem statement. Now a problem statement is not any kind of a recommendation. It's simply a description of the challenges of the problem. And the key things to for success when writing a problem statement are to make it clear and succinct, non-judgmental, and not to come anywhere near the solution. Just describe the problem.

Slide 14: 6. Decide if training is appropriate

Once we've got a problem statement, we really have to honestly ask ourselves: We are a training organization, but is training the solution to this problem?

Slide 15: 7. Propose a solution

Now, once we know what's the solution to the problem, and what's not-- presumably we've made a cogent statement about that--now we need to actually form the proposal for the solution. If you've got an intervention that requires multiple steps--so three classes and a little consulting, for example--be sure that you justify each step in the proposal. Otherwise, people have a tendency to say, "Well, this is a little too expensive. So let's take out steps four and five." And we don't want that to happen if they're integral to the success of the project.

Slide 16: 8. Report the 7 findings of the needs assessment

Now, you just put all of those seven things together in a needs assessment report, and submit that to the client. And this is actually at this point, both an informational document and a sales document.

Slide 17: Evaluate your NA process

If you do a lot of needs assessment, every once in a while, I'd stop and I would talk to your staff and I would talk to key clients and ask yourselves honestly the question: How are we doing with our ability to assess client's challenges and opportunities and to recommend appropriate solutions? And I think this is just a constant work in process. We just keep to it as we learn more.

Slide 18: What's in it for YOU?

What's in it for you? Why should you exert like this? Well, one thing is you're going to write better proposals if you're doing a needs assessment. Even if your needs assessment is a 10-minute phone call. You will also have increased hit rates. And by that I mean, more proposals will be converted into contracts if they're based on a needs assessment--whether that's a simple needs assessment or a complicated one. All of that will increase customer trust and contribute to a professional image because your ability to understand and describe the problem and then create a relevant solution will go up each time you learn more.

Slide 19: Summary

So that's what we have to say about needs assessment. It's a process designed to identify challenges or opportunities in business and to assess whether training or any other intervention will help employees achieve success. They can be done for organizations. They can be done at the job title level like manager. Or they can be done at the individual level to help get an employee up to par as they progress through their career. Needs assessment findings can form the basis of a proposal. It's one of the reasons that we like to do at least a very simple conversational needs assessment. And we need to remember it, because it's very easy to lose track of this when we're a contract education business, that training is not the solution to every problem. It's almost always a part of the solution, but it's not always the sum total.